

# Corporate Unionism (4)

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The source of corporate unionism within the AFL-CIO is contained in Article IV, Sec. 17 of the federation's Constitution, which specifies that international unions may have as many convention votes as the number of members they represent, while state and local central labor bodies are limited to one vote each.

What this means is that a tiny international union, the Federation of Professional Athletes, which has 1,700 members, is entitled to cast 1,700 convention votes, which is nearly three times as many votes as the 51 state federations and 600 central labor councils, combined.

It means, for example, that since the United Food and Commercial Workers had 1,134,285 members, each of the 20 UFCW delegates at the AFL-CIO's 2001 convention was entitled to cast 56,764 convention votes.

In contrast, delegates from state federations like California, Illinois and New York, who represent hundreds of thousands of union members, are allotted one puny vote apiece. They're treated like window-dressing, even though they provide the muscle for the AFL-CIO's economic and political campaigns.

For decades, AFL-CIO executive officers and the policy-making Executive Council held office for two-year terms. But at the 1997 convention, only two years after John Sweeney, the "reformer," was elected president, he and his Council cronies extended their term of office from two years to four years, merely by a voice vote of the delegates. They did this in violation of the AFL-CIO Constitution, which requires a two-thirds majority to approve any amendment.

At the 1999 convention, they approved an amendment, also by voice vote, that mandated federation conventions be held every four years, instead of the traditional two years. And they reduced the number of meetings of the Executive Council from three to two.

To tighten their control even further, Sweeney and the Council pushed through a constitutional amendment that allowed them to

make changes by voice vote, without having to go through the burdensome parliamentary procedure.

The constitution's voting system guarantees them re-election and the ability to freeze out any potential challenger from a state federation or central labor council. Replacements for Council members who retire or die are made by the decision of the inner circle, not by special elections.

Thus, Sweeney as the CEO, and the Executive Council, as the board of directors, have unlimited power to run the AFL-CIO as their private property and make decisions, often self-serving ones, without regard to the opinions or desires of union members.

They can spend millions of dollars of dues money freely, as they see fit, without ever publicly accounting for any of the expenditures. They regard themselves immune from criticism, so certain are they of their controlling power.

The AFL-CIO has developed a one-way communications system on its Web site. It is constantly exhorting unionists to send letters, e-mails and phone calls to Washington on a particular issue, but it won't permit them to express their views and exchange opinions on the official Web site, as it once did in the early 1990s. Top union leaders have no need for feedback from their members to find out whether or not their policies are effective.

Indeed, as union officials became increasingly remote, by choice, it is virtually impossible for any member with a question or comment to get their response or even talk to their secretaries.

Official publications, like the AFL-CIO's *America@Work*, as well as those of most national unions, emphasize attractive layouts and photos of union members, but follow a strict rule never to run news stories that may embarrass or irritate the leadership or carry even a word about the activity of dissidents or vocal critics.

For reasons hard to explain, official labor publications, almost without exception, have never printed any news about Iraq or the war against terrorism, without explaining to union readers for the omission of issues that have dominated public attention and controversy since 9/11. The few letters they print are mainly self-congratulatory or non-controversial.

Even in progressive unions like the Service Employees, Teachers and AFSCME, members do not get the opportunity to vote for their

national officers. Elections take place at conventions, where incumbents generally control a significant majority of the delegates. The Laborers and the Teamsters, on the other hand, elect by a national referendum, but only because it is required by their consent decrees with the Justice Department over past racketeering practices.

Terms of office are now rarely less than three years, and in the building trades, as long as five years. With the near certainty of being re-elected to at least one more five-year term and possibly still another, why shouldn't a national president feel that the union is his private property and he can use it for personal advantage — as many have done and still do?

The trend continues to reduce membership participation in the life of the union. Contracts are signed for as long as six years in duration, leaving members with little to do in the intervening years except to cash in on whatever wage increases and benefits are gained. In some unions, members are not allowed to vote on their contracts or even see copies.

Local union meetings, which at one time were held weekly, are now held quarterly in many unions or on a special occasion, such as voting on a contract or the election of officers. Most meetings are sparsely attended; rarely as many as 4% of the members turn up, because either they live too far from the local union or do not want to spend a boring evening when they have other things to do. Most union officials do not mind a small turnout.

There was a time when all major cities had Labor Temples where members would gather to spend time together. That's all but gone. Union officers don't want members hanging around and disrupting their office routine.

The New York State AFL-CIO, which claims 2.2 million members, has offices on the 35th floor of an office building in the Wall Street area, with no marker on the outside to indicate it's a tenant. Similarly, the New York City Central Labor Union, with 1.2 million members, has its offices tucked away on the 6th floor of an unimpressive office building that it refrains from advertising.

The 51-member Executive Council deserves special mention as a showcase of corporate unionism. This particular group was elected in 1995 as the "Unity" slate in a back-door deal between UFCW President Douglas Dority and AFSCME President Gerald McEntee.

Convention delegates who gave them their near-unanimous approval didn't know most of them or their qualifications.

Since then, the same Council members have been re-elected three times, without ever having to campaign. Who they are and what they say or do at Council meetings is a mystery, because the sessions are held behind closed doors. And most of them keep a low profile, avoiding press interviews and talk shows.

The resolutions that emerge from Council sessions are uniformly unanimous, sometimes written in advance by AFL-CIO staffers. If there are serious disagreements within the Council, they will rarely surface. Preserving unity at all costs is a prime concern of Council members. For the curious, the minutes of Council meetings will be available for inspection twenty years after the event.

The AFL-CIO's corporate mentality has resulted in a freeze on new national leadership and a taboo on fresh ideas that do not originate within their own ranks. A "glass ceiling" exists for union leaders, both men and women, who are denied an opportunity to compete for positions on the national Executive Council. And top labor leaders view with suspicion any grassroots movement they believe may pose a threat to their positions.

The evidence is overwhelming that corporate unionism can't build a healthy, powerful, widely-respected labor movement. What then? What will it take for members to win back their unions?

**Article 5: "Restoring Democratic Unionism" will be posted on Monday, October 4, 2004.**